

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE RHODESIAN INSURGENCY:
A FAILURE OF REGIONAL POLITICS

by

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ABSTRACT

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This Strategy Research Project (SRP) will examine the impact that regional politics had on the outcome of the Rhodesian insurgency that was fought between 1965 and 1980. Specifically, it will focus on how the foreign policy of South Africa in conjunction with the foreign policies of the U.S. and Britain affected the outcome of the insurgency and ultimately led to the fall of the white-rule government in Rhodesia. The central position of this SRP is that the outcome of the Rhodesian insurgency was determined by the political goals of South Africa, the regional power. The U.S., Britain, and the other western powers were pre-occupied with the Cold War and allowed South Africa to set the strategic agenda in Southern Africa during the period of the Rhodesian insurgency. This study will briefly describe the military developments and economic aspects of the insurgency, as well as the diplomatic developments that led to Rhodesia losing its war against the nationalist insurgents.

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THE RHODESIAN INSURGENCY: A FAILURE OF REGIONAL POLITICS

The Rhodesian armed forces and security services battled African nationalist insurgents for fifteen years, from 1965 until 1980. In the end the black insurgents forced the white-rule government under the leadership of Ian Smith to abdicate in favor of a black, majority-rule government. Between 1965 and 1980 most African leaders considered this insurgency the most important military and political struggle in Africa. The insurgency challenged the foreign policies of the U.S., Britain and South during the height of the Cold War. The Rhodesian insurgency was the main, African foreign policy challenge for the U.S. and South Africa during the 1970s.

The central thesis of this study is that the Rhodesian government lost its insurgency against black African nationals not because the Rhodesians were militarily inferior, but because Rhodesia's goal of unilateral independence was counter to the strategic goals of South Africa, the regional power. The internal and external politics of South Africa were the most important factors in deciding the conditions and timeline for political transition in Rhodesia. The U.S., Britain, and other western nations recognized South Africa as the regional power and allowed it to play this dominating role. When the U.S. and Britain again inserted themselves in the Rhodesian crisis in the late 1970s, they found that South Africa had determined an end state and timeline to which they were largely bound.

Numerous studies of the Rhodesian insurgency have detailed the military aspects of the war.¹ Few studies, especially those written in the U.S., have correctly emphasized the important role that South Africa played in resolving the conflict. Rhodesia was militarily out numbered and also made several political mistakes while fighting the insurgents. These facts alone do not account for Rhodesia's military and political failures. The increasing military and political sophistication of the insurgents, especially in the late 1970s, cannot be completely discounted. Still, without the dedicated political support of South Africa, Rhodesia's goal of unilateral independence was doomed regardless of how much military success it had against the insurgents.

This study will briefly describe the background, military developments, and economic aspects of the Rhodesian insurgency. It will spend more time focusing on the diplomatic developments, especially the roles of the U.S. and South Africa. In the long term, the diplomatic actions of these countries, notably South Africa, limited the military successes that Rhodesia frequently had against the insurgents. The study will conclude with a discussion of why Rhodesian lost its war with the black African insurgents and the implications this loss had for

future conflicts of the same nature. It will also discuss the diplomatic challenges the U.S. created by linking its regional foreign policy to that of South Africa.

BACKGROUND

In 1923 the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (Rhodesia) became self-governing. Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) remained a crown colony and Nyasaland (Malawi) was designated a protectorate.² As a self-governing colony Rhodesia enjoyed most of the same rights as the Dominions (e.g. Canada, Australia, etc.). Rhodesia issued its own passports, currency, stamps, and concluded foreign commerce agreements.

Rhodesia, however, did not have a franchise in the League of Nations, and later it did not become a member of the United Nations.³ In 1931 most of the Dominions were granted full nation status, but Rhodesia remained a self-governing colony.⁴ The head of the Rhodesian government was designated a prime minister and had a table seat at the Dominion conferences along with the prime ministers of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. This unique and somewhat uncertain legal standing within the British Commonwealth would remain unchanged until the Unilateral Declaration of Independence was issued in 1965.

In 1953 Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland formed the Central African Federation.⁵ The federation was a loose political and economic association focusing on issues relating to future independence of the colonies. The federation's charter was in effect for ten years, with a mandatory renewal conference in seven years.

In 1959 black Africans led a series of protest, some violent, across the three colonies.⁶ The worst violence was in the southern part of Rhodesia. There were several reasons for the protests. The racial policies in Rhodesia were extremely restrictive. There was a general economic recession across the region. The authorities in Rhodesia were aggressive in combating the violence. The political leaders of Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland disagreed on how much economic and political freedom to give to native Africans. By 1960 the leaders of the three colonies concluded that the Central African Federation charter would not be renewed. Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland applied for independence from Great Britain. In 1963 Northern Rhodesia became the independent country of Zambia and Nyasaland became Malawi.⁷ With the dissolution of the federation Rhodesia required a new constitution. The colonial government drafted a new constitution that expanded the political and economic rights of black Africans, but left political power in the hands of the white settlers. The British government was non-committal about its willingness to grant independence based on the new constitution.

The various African leaders were divided over how to approach the new constitution. A few supported the new constitution, several favored rejection, and others proposed boycotting the entire election process. By late 1963 most African leaders were recommending a boycott of the entire Rhodesian political process and were asking Britain directly to grant independence based on majority rule.⁸

In 1964 a Labour government under Harold Wilson replaced a Conservative government in Great Britain. Prime Minister Wilson indicated that Britain would not support Rhodesia's independence based on the proposed 1963 constitution.⁹ The colonial government of Rhodesia was in a predicament. It was faced with a rejection of a request for independence and most black Africans were boycotting the entire political process. There was growing violence not only in Rhodesia, but in much of former colonial Africa.

In late 1964, white Rhodesians held parliamentary elections replacing the ruling Conservative Party with the more conservative Rhodesian Front Party. Ian Douglas Smith was the party leader and became the Rhodesian Prime Minister. Smith feared that Great Britain would grant Rhodesian independence based on a majority rule government. To preclude this action by Great Britain, on 11 November 1965 his government issued the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), declaring Rhodesia independent of Great Britain.¹⁰ Black African leaders universally rejected the UDI as did most nations of the world.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

The UDI served as a stimulus for insurgent groups to begin operations against the Rhodesian government. The war can be divided into three periods. Period one, 1965-1972, was a period of limited, uncoordinated insurgent attacks.¹¹ The Rhodesian security forces were able to defeat insurgent efforts and the insurgents achieved few military or political objectives.

Period two, 1972-1976, was a period of increased insurgent military and political activity. Rhodesian security forces were able to defeat specific enemy's military operations.¹² Rhodesian forces were also able to inflict a significant number of casualties on the insurgents forces, however, insurgents did make significant political gains in the border regions. The insurgent forces were especially successful in the northeast corner of Rhodesia around Mount Darwin.¹³ During this period the Rhodesian forces began conducting military operations in neighboring countries, particularly Zambia and Mozambique.¹⁴

Period three, 1976-1980, was a period of military stalemate with the Rhodesian government losing effective political control of large portions of the country.¹⁵ The Rhodesian government efforts to achieve political pacification were ineffective. The insurgents increased

military and political pressure on the Rhodesian government. Rhodesian forces continued to conduct successful tactical operations, but had little to no operational or strategic success. The Rhodesian government had lost the political battle.

The African nationalist insurgents were collectively called the “Patriotic Front”.¹⁶ While there were numerous groups, the two main insurgent groups were ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union) and ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union).¹⁷ While clearly anti-Rhodesian, the two groups did not always cooperate and often supported different political aims. The Rhodesian security services and armed forces often successfully exploited these differences between the ZAPU and ZANU. It was not until the late 1970s that the two organizations began conducting coordinated military and political operations.

ZAPU was the older nationalist movement. It was led by Joshua Nkoma and was centered in the Ndebel speaking tribes.¹⁸ Its military wing was called ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army). The ZIPRA was primarily influenced and trained by Soviet and Cuban advisors. ZIPRA was the better armed of the insurgent groups and had the more traditional military organization. ZAPU/ZIPRA forces were inactive in the mid 1970s but became very active between 1978 and 1980.

ZANU was formed in 1963 by members who left ZAPU. ZANU was led by Robert Mugabe, a Shona speaker.¹⁹ While more broadly represented than the ZAPU, it was most influential in the Shona speaking areas. Its military wing was called ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army). The ZANLA was advised and supplied by the Chinese. ZANLA was quicker to introduce political officers into the war effort. After 1975, ZANLA had a close working relationship with the communist government of Mozambique. ZANLA was larger but materially poorer than ZIPRA; however, it consistently had more insurgents inside Rhodesia than did ZIPRA.²⁰

Most of the fighting for the Rhodesians was carried out by four units: the Rhodesian African Rifles, The Rhodesian Light Infantry, the Special Air Services, and the Selous Scouts. In addition to these army units the Rhodesian Air Force, the Rhodesian police (called the British South African Police), the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), and the Special Branch were actively involved throughout the conflict. The CIO and Special Branch were responsible for intelligence operations.²¹ South African police and military units actively supported Rhodesia, even after these units were officially withdrawn in 1975.

The Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) was Rhodesia’s oldest military unit. It consisted of three battalions of black soldiers led by white officers. The RAR operated as a light infantry unit inside Rhodesia. The Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) was one battalion of airborne and air

assault trained soldiers.²² The unit was all white and was well known for its helicopter borne vertical envelopment operations. The RLI was a direct action unit that operated inside Rhodesia and in cross border operations.

The Special Air Service (SAS) was a small battalion of white-only airborne trained soldiers.²³ The unit undertook a wide range of special operations. It was primarily a direct action unit, but did perform other missions. It conducted cross border operations, often in conjunction with the RLI. The Selous Scouts were a battalion sized organization, approximately 50% black and 50% white. The unit specialized in counterinsurgency, "pseudo-gang", types of operations.²⁴ The Selous Scouts had the highest kill ratio of any army unit as well as more total kills than any other Rhodesian unit. The unit operated inside Rhodesia and in external operations in neighboring countries.

Between 1965 and 1972, both ZANU and ZAPU infiltrated small numbers of insurgents into Rhodesia. Rhodesian security forces defeated these forces. The African National Congress (ANC) also sent insurgents from South Africa. South Africa responded by sending approximately 1200 policemen and paramilitary forces to assist Rhodesia.²⁵ In 1970 ZANU/ZANLA forces began coordinating with resistance forces in Mozambique to expand operations against Rhodesia. ZANLA mounted a series of operations out of Mozambique but these were ended by a series of Rhodesian SAS raids in March 1972.²⁶ By the spring of 1972 most insurgent attacks had been defeated. The Rhodesians also had measured successes against insurgent bases in the border regions of Zambia and Mozambique. Both ZANU and ZAPU had little success in mounting a political campaign against the Rhodesian government.

In December 1972, period two of the war began when ZANLA insurgents launched a series of attacks around Centenary near the Mozambique border.²⁷ Between 1972 and 1975 most of the heavy fighting was in the north east corner of Rhodesia near the Mozambique border. At the tactical level the insurgents had limited success against the Rhodesian forces. At the political level the ZANU was effective in exploiting local village leaders and other previously apolitical groups to turn against the Rhodesian government.

In late 1974 and early 1975 Mozambique and Angola fell to communist supported rebels.²⁸ This fact significantly increased the sanctuary areas from which insurgents could freely launch attacks against Rhodesia. In 1975 South Africa initiated a cease fire which actually allowed both sides time to regroup and expand operations. In 1975 South Africa also "officially" withdrew its forces from Rhodesia.

The insurgents, however, failed to exploit the opportunities created by the South African initiated cease fire and withdrawal. This was partly due to major infighting between the ZANU

and ZAPU forces. Rhodesian security forces also conducted a number of successful raids and intelligence operations in Zambia and Mozambique which intensified the infighting between the ZANU and ZAPU forces. In 1975 Zambia expelled and imprisoned a significant number of ZANU leaders.²⁹ 1975 was a quiet year with the smallest number of military operations and casualties since the late 1960s.³⁰

In early 1976 ZANLA forces launched a series of attacks from Mozambique. At the same time insurgents launched limited attacks from Botswana in the west. Rhodesian security forces attacked the insurgents in the border, killing approximately 2000 rebels, while suffering almost 300 loses. In addition almost 1500 Rhodesian civilians were killed.³¹ For the first time the Rhodesian government acknowledged that it had been unable to clear all sectors of insurgent forces.

In 1976 Mozambique began to receive increased Soviet military aid. The Rhodesian SAS and Selous Scouts conducted several successful raids into Mozambique but were unable to interdict the flow of insurgents or supplies. In early 1977 Rhodesian forces launched large raids into Mozambique and Zambia. These raids had good "kill ratios" (approximately 20:1) and demonstrated fundamental weaknesses in ZANU and ZAPU security operations.³² Still, the insurgent forces remained active inside Rhodesia. In late 1977 the insurgents conducted limited operations in the center of Rhodesia for the first time.³³

In November 1977 Prime Minister Smith announced on Rhodesian radio and television that Rhodesia had accepted the principle of majority rule and would set up a transition government.³⁴ Despite this announcement, Rhodesian security forces conducted several major operations to include a raid into Mozambique which killed over 2000 insurgents.³⁵ Rhodesian security forces also effectively cleared the south east corner of Rhodesia of all insurgent forces. In other parts of the country insurgent forces continued conducting military and political operations.

In 1978 ZANU and ZAPU forces stepped up attacks across Rhodesia. The Rhodesian government imposed martial law across much of rural Rhodesia. The security forces suffered relatively few casualties but civilian casualties often rose to over 30 per day.³⁶ Rhodesia launched several cross border raids that demonstrated the continuing tactical superiority of the security forces. The government of Rhodesia, however, was unable to translate these tactical successes into operational or strategic successes and the insurgents continued to consolidate political gains in rural areas.

In December 1978 insurgents struck in the Rhodesian capital, Salisbury, destroying a significant portion of Rhodesia's reserve fuel.³⁷ In February 1979 ZIPRA forces shot down a

Rhodesian civilian airliner. Rhodesian forces conducted retaliatory raids into Angola, Zambia, and Mozambique, killing large numbers of insurgents and supporters.³⁸ In April 1979 Rhodesians voted in a “transitional” election in which Bishop Muzorewa was elected the first black prime minister in a government still largely run by whites. Most nations refused to recognize the election results. Both ZANU and ZAPU continued to fight.

In September 1979 both sides increased their operational tempo. Rhodesian forces attacked ZANU targets in Mozambique. Security forces also destroyed several key bridges in Zambia as well as much of Zambia’s corn and grain crops.³⁹ While these losses slowed the tempo of the insurgent forces, they did little to affect the strategic balance. Insurgent attacks continued across much of Rhodesia with varying degrees of success.

The U.S., South Africa, and Great Britain stepped up pressure on the Rhodesian government to emplace a real transitional government. In early December 1979 the British sent Lord Arthur Christopher John Soames to assume the duties of Governor General.⁴⁰ On 28 December 1979 all parties agreed to a cease fire. At the time of the cease fire there were five military forces operating in Rhodesia. ZANU and ZAPU forces controlled the Zambian and Mozambique border regions and most of the northeast and northwest parts of Rhodesia. The Rhodesian security forces controlled the middle of the country and the south of the country near the South African border. South African paramilitary forces were active along the borders with Botswana and Mozambique. In addition Lord Soames was accompanied by a small Commonwealth monitoring force which remained mostly in the capital of Salisbury.⁴¹

The skill of Lord Soames, several members of the Rhodesian government and some members of the insurgent movements held Rhodesia together during this challenging period. In April 1980 Robert Mugabe’s ZANU party won Rhodesia’s first open, multi-party election. Mugabe became the first prime minister of the new nation of Zimbabwe. The insurgency had lasted 15 years and cost approximately 30,000 lives.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

Following Rhodesia’s UDI on 11 November 1965 Great Britain led the world by declaring extensive political and economic sanctions against Rhodesia. On 16 November 1965 Britain passed a comprehensive set of political and economic sanctions against Rhodesia.⁴² These measures effectively banned all imports from and exports to Rhodesia except for medical supplies, certain foreign aid, and charity donations. These sanctions were directed against future transactions, not current ones. This ensured that the impact of any sanctions were gradual and delayed.⁴³

The UN Security Council followed Britain's lead and on 20 November 1965 passed a comprehensive set of economic sanctions against Rhodesia. The first set of sanctions was voluntary. Few countries enforced these sanctions. It was not until 16 December 1966 that the UN Security Council passed mandatory sanctions against Rhodesia.⁴⁴

Nations around the world followed the UN mandate with varying degrees of compliance. The U.S. Congress did not pass import/export bans on Rhodesian products until 16 July 1968, 32 months after the UDI. The U.S. ban had several exceptions (e.g. metals), and in 1971 Congress further relaxed controls, allowing the import of a wide variety of raw materials.⁴⁵ The U.S. Congress did not pass comprehensive economic sanctions against Rhodesia until 1977.

South Africa, Portugal and its colonies, South West Africa, Zambia, and Malawi made no attempt to comply with the sanctions. In fact, South Africa and Mozambique (until 1976) were the main routes through which Rhodesia received most of its imports. Mozambique sold Rhodesia most of its crude and refined oil products until 1976.

Japan, West Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium maintained normal trade levels with Rhodesia. Surprisingly, several nations in sub-Saharan Africa also continued to trade with Rhodesia, especially in agricultural products. These countries include not only Zambia and Malawi, but also Botswana, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Much of this trade was driven by necessity, but it was still significant in terms of volume and cost. As one economist wrote, "If the Africans, at British instigation, were literally to shut their borders with Rhodesia, they would face starvation. Rhodesia and South Africa have become the breadbasket of sub-Saharan Africa."⁴⁶

While economic sanctions never achieved their desired political results, they were particularly ineffective in the earlier part of the insurgency, 1965-1972. The slow and gradual nature of the imposition of the sanctions was partly to blame for this failure.⁴⁷ The Rhodesian government showed itself to be adaptive in working around sanctions. Also, insurgent military actions were unable to significantly impact the Rhodesian economy during this period.

In 1964 Rhodesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was approximately 320.5 million pound sterling (900 million dollars). The GDP grew by an average of 8% until 1974, when it reached 500.5 million pound sterling (approximately 1.4 billion dollars).⁴⁸ The only major Rhodesian import to show decline was tobacco. Rhodesia initiated a program of gasoline rationing in 1966, but discontinued in 1967. The government did not reintroduce gasoline rationing until 1974.⁴⁹

In the period 1974-1980 the Rhodesian economy did show signs of decline, with the economy showing negative growth from 1978 to 1980. Several factors, many unrelated to the UN imposed embargo, began to affect the economy. The Arab led oil embargo of 1974 affected

all western nations to include Rhodesia. At the same time Southern Africa had two years, 1974 and 1975, of major drought. The drought not only harmed Rhodesian agricultural production, but also the ability of its African neighbors to buy Rhodesian products. Between 1974 and 1980 the whole of Southern Africa was in an economic recession.

After 1973, the intensity of the insurgency began to affect the Rhodesian economy, especially in the rural areas. As the insurgents gained political control, and at times military control, of large rural areas agricultural production from both white and black owned farms showed significant decline. The protected village program, an attempt to move rural Africans into police protected settlements, also uprooted a large number of agricultural workers and small land owners.

The overthrow of the Portuguese government and subsequent communist-led revolts in Mozambique and Angola had a major impact on Rhodesia's import/export operations. When Mozambique closed its border to Rhodesia in 1976 it confiscated about 20% of Rhodesia's rolling stock that was trapped in Mozambique and laden with supplies.⁵⁰ Mozambique also halted the flow of crude oil and refined petroleum through its ports, further reducing Rhodesia's ability to import these critical commodities.

After 1976 Rhodesia became almost exclusively dependent on South Africa for all its imports and exports. This fact complicated the political tension between South Africa and Rhodesia. It also gave the South African government increased political leverage over Rhodesia, even though the South African government was politically divided over the Rhodesian UDI. South Africa's economy was also adversely affected by the world-wide economic recession between 1975 and 1980, especially the impact of higher crude oil prices.⁵¹ This made it more expensive for South Africa to provide economic and military assistance to Rhodesia.

A combination of sanctions and world events did adversely affect the Rhodesian economy after 1974. Sanctions had their most impact in the areas of crude oil, refined petroleum products, and spare parts for military equipment. The intensity of the insurgency after 1977 had an adverse impact on the Rhodesian economy. Still, it is clear that economic sanctions were ineffective in forcing the Rhodesian government to transition to majority black rule. Without the widespread political success of the insurgency, economic sanctions would have had little impact on the Rhodesian political situation.

DIPLOMATIC DEVELOPMENTS

Great Britain, South Africa, and the U.S. were the key diplomatic players during the Rhodesian insurgency. Britain, legally the sovereign authority in Rhodesia, was diplomatically marginal during much of the crisis. The British were active immediately following the UDI and again during the transition period from 1978 to 1980. Also, the British organized and supervised the Commonwealth Monitoring Force that would monitor the political handover in Rhodesia.⁵² During much of the insurgency, however, the British showed political and diplomatic inconsistency and a lack of political resolve.

U.S. foreign policy toward Rhodesia can be divided into four distinct periods:

- Benign indifference
- National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 39
- NSSM 39 plus growing concern over communist influence in Southern Africa
- Direct diplomatic involvement

The period between 1965 and 1969 was one of benign U.S. indifference towards Rhodesia. The U.S. took few actions to support the British or UN resolutions and generally showed no interest in the affairs of Southern Africa.

The period between 1969 and 1976 was one of limited U.S. interest. In 1969 the Nixon administration drafted National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 39, which outlined the U.S. policy towards Southern Africa.⁵³ The basic points of NSSM 39 were the following:

- South Africa was the regional power in Southern Africa.
- The U.S. supported a gradual transition to majority rule in Southern Africa.
- The white regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa were well embedded and as a practical matter had to be dealt with as established nations.
- The white regimes were actively anti-communist and useful sources of intelligence and strategic materials.

Dr. Henry Kissinger, the key supporter of NSSM 39, believed this policy balanced the main U.S. concern of checking the spread of communism in Africa, with the acceptance that any long-term solution in Rhodesia would eventually require a transition to moderate black rule.⁵⁴ NSSM 39 was an example of the Nixon administration's cautious, pragmatic approach to the

third world during the Cold War. Africa was viewed as an area of lesser strategic importance than Europe, the Middle East or Southeast Asia.

The third period, 1976-1977, represented a continuation of NSSM 39, with an acute understanding that the fall of the Portuguese government and the transition of its colonies, Mozambique and Angola, to pro-communist, black-led regimes had changed the military and political situation in the whole of Southern Africa. The U.S. became concerned over growing Cuban military involvement in the region and South Africa's increasingly aggressive efforts to counter Cuban actions. Dr. Kissinger has written that there was genuine concern in Washington D.C. over the possibility of direct, military confrontation between Cuban and South African forces.⁵⁵

The U.S. became convinced that a transition to majority black rule in Rhodesia was a necessary condition to check the expanding communist influence. The U.S. decided to exercise this policy by applying steady but measured diplomatic pressure on South Africa, which by 1976 was providing significant economic and military assistance to Rhodesia. In 1976, the U.S. opened a series of talks, first with South Africa, and later with Rhodesia, on a plan and timeline for the transition to majority rule.⁵⁶ The U.S. generally accepted the plan and timeline proposed by South Africa. Rhodesia, willingly or otherwise, agreed to the South African proposal. The diplomatic framework established by the U.S. and South Africa in 1976 set the strategic conditions for the political transition in Rhodesia.

The fourth period, between 1977 and 1980, was a time of more active U.S. diplomatic and rhetorical support for majority rule in Rhodesia. At the same time the U.S. continued to exercise its diplomatic pressure primarily through South Africa and did not radically depart from the policies of NSSM 39. South African pressure and support remained critical to Rhodesia's acceptance of a plan to transition to majority rule.⁵⁷ The Carter Administration's policies towards Rhodesia did not differ significantly from those of the Nixon and Ford Administrations. The Carter Administration accepted the timeline established by the U.S. and South Africa in 1976. The U.S. did work more actively with Britain, South Africa, Rhodesia, the UN and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to establish a plan for elections and election monitoring.

While it would be unfair to say the U.S. played no role in the transition of Rhodesia to majority rule, U.S. policy was marked by indifference, caution, and a willingness to let South Africa play the role of the regional power broker. The effect of these actions on U.S. foreign policy was that most Africans (black and white) came to view the U.S. as indifferent to the political situation in Africa. This belief reduced the overall effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy in Southern Africa.

Between 1965 and 1980 U.S. foreign policy towards Africa was divided between two competing philosophical ideals: support for majority black rule and the fact that most black rebel movements, and several African states, were communist or communist supported. The number one U.S. strategic concern was the Cold War. Majority rule, while not unimportant, was a lower strategic concern to the U.S. Both Rhodesia and South Africa were seen as firmly anti-communist and generally supportive of U.S. Cold War policies.

South Africa's foreign policy towards Rhodesia was pragmatic and complex. Paul Moorcraft writes,

So long as white rule looked firm in Pretoria's buffer states Pretoria was prepared to bolster their war efforts. Once the tides of war began to turn, the South African government launched into a frantic search for the ever-elusive black "moderate" alternatives. Failing that Pretoria's policy was to debilitate its enemies by economic and military means.⁵⁸

South Africa's "buffer states" were South West Africa (Namibia), Botswana, Rhodesia, Mozambique, and to a lesser degree Angola. Each buffer state was different, and the nature of the struggle for majority rule differed in each state. While in terms of manpower and money South Africa invested more in the Angolan insurgency, Rhodesia was the only struggle followed closely by the white South African population. To many South Africans, Rhodesia was different. Compared to the colonial governments of Angola and Mozambique, Rhodesia resisted the insurgents with a level of commitment not previously seen in Southern Africa.

Despite this "psychological bond" with Rhodesia, the South African government was deeply ambiguous about the UDI.⁵⁹ The South African government, in fact, never officially recognized the Rhodesian government. South Africa had come to recognize by the late 1960s that white rule in Rhodesia was not practical, even if briefly possible. The only real solution was a transition to "moderate" black rule. Paul Moorcraft again writes, "Hence the greatest paradox of the Rhodesian war is that Rhodesia broke away from Britain to avoid black rule and then, with the onset of the guerrilla war became completely dependent upon a South African regime which was even more determined than Britain to establish a black premier in Salisbury."⁶⁰

From 1965 until 1972 South Africa assisted Rhodesia in circumventing the economic sanctions and by providing approximately 2000 "policemen" to prevent the African National Conference (ANC) guerrillas from assisting Rhodesian insurgents. South Africa actively exchanged intelligence with Rhodesia and used Rhodesia as a training ground for its counter-insurgency forces. South Africa also provided the Rhodesians with a significant amount of military equipment and spare parts.

In January 1973 Rhodesia sealed its border with Zambia, blocking all goods to Zambia to include South African products since these goods also used the rail and road systems that ran through Rhodesia. South Africa was concerned that Rhodesia's actions were having a destabilizing impact on neighboring moderate regimes (e.g. Zambia), as well as the South African economy in general. Prime Minister Vorster of South Africa and President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia met and proposed a ceasefire.⁶¹ The ceasefire was temporary and was a political disaster for all parties.

In August 1975 South Africa officially withdrew all police and military forces from Rhodesia, but covertly left in place helicopters, pilots, and ground crews. These forces remained in Rhodesia until 1979. While South Africa would continue to provide some degrees of military support to Rhodesia until the end of the insurgency, however, on the diplomatic front South Africa began to put serious pressure on Rhodesia to accept a settlement with the insurgents.

A series of events took place in 1976 which affected South Africa's willingness to support Rhodesia. Pro-communist insurgents had taken control in both Angola and Mozambique. South Africa's extensive covert operations in Angola had just come to world-wide attention.⁶² Several nations in the UN were calling for extensive sanctions against South Africa. Mozambique had sealed its border with Rhodesia and South Africa. In addition, large numbers of Cuban soldiers were operating openly in Angola and Mozambique.

On 9 August 1976 Rhodesia launched a major raid into Mozambique. Over 1,000 insurgents were killed. South Africa was not warned of the raid.⁶³ Soon after this South Africa announced that it was officially ending all military aid to Rhodesia. More seriously, Dr. Muller, South Africa's foreign minister, announced publicly that the government in Pretoria supported the principle of majority rule in Rhodesia.⁶⁴ In late 1976 Henry Kissinger pressured John Vorster to force Rhodesia to come to terms with the insurgents. These talks led to further talks with Prime Minister Smith of Rhodesia also being invited. It was during these meetings that the strategic conditions for government transfer in Rhodesia were put in place.

In 1977 South Africa perceived that the new Carter Administration was backing away from some of the principles of NSSM 39. Prime Minister Vorster authorized increased economic and military aid to Rhodesia. Ian Smith proposed a series of direct negotiations with selected insurgent leaders, a so-called "internal settlement" plan.⁶⁵ The goal of the internal settlement was a power sharing arrangement with moderate black leaders in which whites still held considerable political and economic power. South Africa supported the internal settlement plan while the U.S. and Britain rejected the plan.

The South Africans gave passive support to Rhodesia when Prime Minister Smith reached an “internal settlement” agreement with three moderate black leaders: Bishop Muzorewa, Chief Sithole, and Jeremiah Chirea. The agreement, however, lacked the support of the majority of the insurgents and the fighting continued. In the fall of 1978 P.W. Botha replaced John Vorster as the Prime Minister of South Africa.

In April 1979 Rhodesia held multi-party elections in which about 65% of the eligible population voted. Bishop Muzorewa’s party won 51 of the 72 seats reserved for blacks.⁶⁶ Whites retained 28 seats under the representation plan. The U.S. and British governments rejected the election results and encouraged the rest of the world to reject the results. P.W. Botha was reported to be deeply concerned that the actions of the U.S. and Britain were about to ignite a larger war in Southern Africa.⁶⁷ South Africa asked the U.S. and Britain to assist directly in resolving the Rhodesian crisis.

Great Britain sponsored a Commonwealth Conference in August 1979. The Commonwealth members agreed in principle to support multi-party elections in Rhodesia in early 1980, and to provide a military force to monitor the elections. During the conference both the Rhodesian security forces and the insurgents continued military operations. On 12 December 1979 the British government announced that it was sending Lord Soames to Rhodesia to act as the Governor General during the transition. Lord Soames, with the assistance of an increasingly distrustful Rhodesian security force and some help from insurgent leaders, held the country together until elections could take place the following year. The U.S. and South Africa officially remained neutral during the election process, but South Africa did provide money to the Muzorewa campaign.

In February 1980 Robert Mugabe’s party won 57 seats, out of 100 in an election in which over two million citizens voted. In April 1980 Rhodesia officially became Zimbabwe and Mugabe became its first prime minister. South Africa withdrew its remaining personnel and equipment. The South African government had worked hard to place a moderate black leader in power in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. Instead, it got Robert Mugabe considered the most pro-communist of the insurgent leaders.

CONCLUSION

The main reason Rhodesian lost its insurgency was that the UDI and white rule in Rhodesia were not compatible with the strategic vision of South Africa, the regional power. By the late 1960s, South Africa recognized that white rule beyond its borders was impossible. While South Africa would support Rhodesia’s counterinsurgency, its long term goal was the

establishment of moderate black rule among its neighbors. This theme would dominate South Africa's foreign policy from the late 1960s until the 1980s. Furthermore, South Africa's goals were compatible with the goals of the U.S. and the other western powers.

Rhodesia not only lost the war, in the end it fought a war that it could not win. Despite numerous tactical victories, the Rhodesian government never understood its place in the larger strategic picture of Southern Africa. The Rhodesian government failed to develop a political end state beyond the status quo. It confused the threat of external communism, a real but limited threat, with the real threat of internal nationalism. The Rhodesian government never comprehended that African participation in national politics at some meaningful level was the only condition that would permit Rhodesia to exist as an independent nation. Rhodesia was caught up in a political process that was bigger than itself, yet it failed to develop a political strategy to deal with this reality.

For the U.S. and other western nations Rhodesia presented several challenges. Rhodesia was always an area of secondary importance to the West. Rhodesia did not fit neatly into the West's Cold War priorities. The West, to include the U.S., could never make up its mind where it stood on Rhodesia. For the most part the U.S. and other western nations were content to let South Africa set the strategic initiative in Southern Africa. The U.S. and other nations sent mixed signals about their intentions towards Rhodesia. This indecision and mixed signals encouraged both sides in the Rhodesian insurgency to believe they had the support of the West. This belief encouraged both sides to continue the conflict much longer than necessary as both sides sought a military solution to a political problem.

While the number of deaths in Rhodesia was much smaller than those of later conflicts in Rwanda, Sudan, or Somalia, the Rhodesian insurgency served as a harbinger of things to come in Africa. This was a lesson nations like the U.S., Britain, and South Africa would have to learn again. For both the U.S. and Britain, Rhodesia highlighted the problems that powerful nations have when they develop no consistent foreign policies towards a region and allow regional powers like South Africa to de facto develop their regional foreign policies for them. When the U.S. and Britain tried to reassert their positions, they found to some degree that their hands were tied.

Rhodesia is a classic example of how small wars in out-of-the-way places can linger for years, often with indecisive results. The world powers were pre-occupied with the Cold War and largely uninterested in African insurgencies. The western powers deferred their Southern African policies to the political and military desires of South Africa. By this approach, the U.S.

and Britain seriously limited the influence they were able to exert in the Rhodesian insurgency and the whole of Southern Africa that continues even to this day.

WORD COUNT=6,277

ENDNOTES

¹ Good studies of the military aspects of the war include Peter Abott and Philip Bothan, *Modern African Wars (1): Rhodesia 1965-1980* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1986), James K. Bruton, "Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia." *Military Review* 59 (March 1979): 26-39, Bruce Hoffman, Jennifer M. Taw and David Arnold, *Lessons for Contemporary Counterinsurgencies: The Rhodesian Experience* (Washington D.C.: RAND, 1991), Charles Lohman and Robert I MacPherson, *Rhodesia: Tactical Victory, Strategic Defeat* (Quantico: Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1983), and Paul Moorcraft and Peter McLaughlin, *Chimurenga: The War in Rhodesia* (Johannesburg: Collins, 1983).

² Charles Burton Marshall, *Crisis Over Rhodesia: A Skeptical View* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 17-18.

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ Arthur Campbell Turner, "Independent Rhodesia." *Current History* 58 (March 1970), 131.

⁵ Anthony R. Wilkerson, *Insurgency in Rhodesia, 1957-1973* (London: The International Institute For Strategic Studies, 1973), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Marshall, 26.

⁸ Wilkerson, 7-8.

⁹ Turner, 133.

¹⁰ For a text of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence see *Current History* 50 (March 1966), 174-177.

¹¹ Paul L. Moorcraft, *African Nemesis: War and Revolution in Southern Africa 1945-2010* (London: Brassey's, 1990), 124.

¹² Abbott, 11.

¹³ Ken Flower, *Serving Secretly: An Intelligence Chief on Record, Rhodesia into Zimbabwe, 1964 to 1981* (Harare: National Printing and Publishing, 1987), 121.

¹⁴ The best summary of the major cross-border operations is contained in the RAND study listed above. See Hoffman, 77-99.

¹⁵ Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, 121.

¹⁶ Abbott, 8.

¹⁷ Lohman, 13.

¹⁸ Abbott, 8.

¹⁹ Lohman, 13. Also see Flower, 104-105.

²⁰ Abbott, 9-10.

²¹ See Flower, 17-19. Also see Ron Reid-Daly, *Pamwe Chet: The Legend of the Selous Scouts* (Johannesburg: Covos Day, 1999), 8-9.

²² An outstanding introduction to the Rhodesian Light Infantry is Chris Cocks, *Fireforce: One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Weltevredenpark: Covos Day, 2001).

²³ Barbara Cole, *The Elite: The Story of the Rhodesian Special Air Service* (Transkei: Three Knights Publishing, 1984).

²⁴ Reid-Daly, 9-11.

²⁵ John Barratt, "Southern Africa: A South African View." *Foreign Affairs* 55 (October 1976), 155. Also see Cole, 78 and Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, 126-127.

²⁶ Cole, 40-42.

²⁷ Abbott, 11.

²⁸ Ibid., 12. Also see Reid-Daly, 109-113, and Cole 60-61.

²⁹ Reid-Daly, 173. Also see Cole, 61 and Flower 147-148.

³⁰ Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, 130.

³¹ Abbott, 12.

³² Cole, 169-189., Reid-Daly, 315-331, and Cocks, 113-130.

³³ Reid-Daly, 314-316.

³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 958-965.

³⁵ Hoffman, 80-81.

³⁶ Abbott, 13.

³⁷ Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, 140

³⁸ For details see Lohman, 41-42, Hoffman, 83-84, and Cole 322-240.

³⁹ Abbott, 13.

⁴⁰ Michael Charlton, *The Last Colony in Africa: Diplomacy and the Independence of Rhodesia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 125. Also see comment on 134 and 135.

⁴¹ Jeremy Ginifer, *Managing Arms in Peace Process: Rhodesia/Zimbabwe* (New York: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1995), 5. Also see pages 18-20.

⁴² Donald L. Losman, *International Economic Sanctions: The Cases of Cuba, Israel, and Rhodesia* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 94.

⁴³ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁴ Flower, 63. Also see Losman, 94-95.

⁴⁵ Losman, 95.

⁴⁶ Neil McInnes, "The World at Work", *Barron's* (15 June 1975), p.29.

⁴⁷ Flower, 62.

⁴⁸ Losman, 86. Also see L.H. Gann, "Prospects for White Resistance", *African Report* (September-October 1977), 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁰ Losman, 104.

⁵¹ John de St. Jorre, "Inside the Laager: White Power in South Africa", *Foreign Affairs* 55 (October 1976), 184-185. Also see John Gotpeter, "Changing South Africa", *Current History* 78 (March 1980), 121-122.

⁵² For details see the previously cited works by Charlton and Ginifer.

⁵³ Kissinger, 916-917.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 913-915. Also see Barratt, 148-154.

⁵⁶ Kissinger, 958-965. Also see Richard W. Hull, "The Continuing Crisis in Rhodesia", *Current History* 78 (March 1980), 107-108.

⁵⁷ See Ian Smith's comment to Michael Charlton on pages 3-5 in Charlton's *The Last Colony in Africa*. Also see Pik Botha's comments on pages 86-87.

⁵⁸ Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, 122.

⁵⁹ Charlton, 102.

⁶⁰ Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, 64.

⁶¹ Barratt, 149-150.

⁶² Ibid., 150-154. Also see Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, 76-98 for a description of South African operations.

⁶³ Flower, 163.

⁶⁴ Kissinger, 965.

⁶⁵ Richard W. Hull, "Rhodesia in Crisis", *Current Affairs* 76 (March 1979), 105.

⁶⁶ Charlton, 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

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